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Surely there are better ways to stop Iran's nuclear program than Republican war threats or most Democrats' hat-in-hand diplomacy. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) has several good ideas.

Co-chairman of the bipartisan House Iran Working Group, Kirk for three years has been advocating cutting off Iran's gasoline supplies to supplement other economic sanctions and weaken President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's hold on power. Kirk also is trying to persuade the Bush administration to block \$870 million in World Bank loans to Iran, including one for a water-treatment facility near the Islamic republic's nuclear facility at Natanz.

As co-chairman of another bipartisan ad hoc House panel, the China Working Group, he has been pushing for creation of a multi-national fund to develop alternative sources of energy for China in order to weaken Chinese diplomatic support for Iran.

And as a Naval Reserve intelligence officer, he is advocating inclusion of Israel and Bahrain in the U.S. national anti-missile defense system against Iran.

A leader of the moderate Republican Tuesday Group, Kirk has a reputation for developing creative "third way" ideas, including the GOP "suburban agenda" designed to appeal to Democratic-leaning districts like his own, located north of Chicago.

He formed the Iran Working Group with Rep. Robert Andrews (D-N.J.) and the China Working Group with Rep. Rick Larsen (D-Wash.) to give Congressional backbenchers a role in developing policy. The two panels now have 35 and 75 members, respectively. Kirk has a formal foreign policy swatch as a member of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs.

In an interview, Kirk told me he differs from the Bush administration and most GOP candidates

for president in favoring direct negotiations with Iran and in avoiding talk about military action. He also favors tougher measures than the “unconditional” diplomacy advocated by most Democrats.

“I do agree that we should be talking to [Iran],” he said, “because direct negotiations with [former Yugoslav dictator Slobodan] Milosevic were part of undermining his will. And there were a number of direct discussions with [Libyan ruler Muammar] el-Qaddafi and we undermined him. So, I think we should always talk because the discussion can weaken the will of the other side.”

Kirk said he favors talks not only with Ahmadinejad, but with his Iranian political rivals, including former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

As to GOP presidential candidates’ talk of bombing or blockading Iran, Kirk said, “If you are running for president, you could BE president, so the best thing to do is talk about what you would do if you actually WERE president of the United States, not just playing one on TV. ... If you actually were president, you would look at the most robust economic sanctions that would actually work before launching any kind of unpredictable and hugely expensive military operation.”

On the basis of unclassified sources, Kirk said he’s convinced that Iran is at least two to three years away from developing fissile material for a bomb, “so we’re not talking about an urgent crisis right now.” It would take even longer to manufacture a deliverable weapon that would threaten Israel and other U.S. allies, he said.

He said it largely has escaped notice — “because it’s a good-news story” — but “10 years of tough sanctions and diplomacy” convinced Qaddafi to give up Libya’s nuclear program. “He just called up the CIA and they carted it away to Oak Ridge, Tenn., where it’s buried,” he said.

As to war threats by the Bush administration, Kirk said, “I don’t think it’s necessary. A president should always be ambiguous as to what he would do or not do to protect the U.S. and its allies. And, war planning should go on behind closed doors, which is the work of the Pentagon anyway.

“But my recommendation is, it’s far more productive to advance the cause of effective sanctions because this is a big step for our allies,” who may be reluctant to participate in a runup to war.

Among the Democratic candidates, he said Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (N.Y.) was “responsible” during Tuesday night’s TV debate in Philadelphia by advocating a policy of sanctions plus diplomacy.

As to other candidates, though, “if you say, ‘well, we’re not going to take action against terrorism and undermining the non-proliferation policy of the West,’ what are you going to do? She’s pretty good. For the rest of them, I’m not sure where they are.”

For several months, Kirk has been urging Bush to adopt the kind of stiff sanctions against the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps that the administration announced last week — a move denounced by Clinton’s Democratic rivals as a step toward war.

For even longer, Kirk has been advocating a “quarantine” to cut off Iran’s gasoline supplies. Even though Iran is a major oil producer, it imports 40 percent of its gasoline, and this summer Ahmadinejad imposed gasoline rationing, causing riots in Tehran.

If sanctions were imposed on Iran’s gasoline suppliers — the Dutch energy broker Vitol, ship insurer Lloyds of London and refineries in India and the United Arab Emirates — shipments likely would stop without naval action, he said, though it would be a backup.

“Ahmadinejad’s nuclear program is very popular,” Kirk said, “but his domestic program is not. The moment the average guy starts to have problems running his business or getting to work, Ahmadinejad is going to have real political problems.”

So far, the administration opposes a gasoline cutoff, fearing \$100-a-barrel oil. But Kirk said that Saudi Arabia, which fears Iran, could prevent a price spike by increasing production.

China has undercut other sanctions because it imports oil from Iran, so Kirk has been urging the administration to establish a lending program for Central Asian sources. The administration also is reluctant to cut off World Bank loans, but Kirk argues, “imagine the embarrassment of ... cutting a check from 19th Street in Washington to the government of President Ahmadinejad.”

As a backup, Kirk advocates including Israel and Bahrain as sites, along with Poland, in the U.S. missile defense system. All this makes eminent good sense to me, far better sense than talking about invasions, bombing raids, World War III — or “unconditional” talks.